

Prelude: A setting of Psalm 110 “The Lord most high...” harmonised for the 1635 Scottish Psalter and played on the Laggan organ by Alan Buchan

Words of welcome

Welcome to worship for this the first Sunday of Lent. However you choose to mark Lent, or if you choose not to mark it, these weeks leading up to Easter are a good time to reflect on the wonder and mystery that is God: God who made us and loves us and saves us. And so our first hymn today is

Hymn: Immortal, invisible God, only wise

Prayer:

We praise your great name, Lord God, we praise you by so many names that you are given. The one who is and who will be. The Creator. The Lord of heaven and earth. The Saviour. And most importantly, Jesus. We come into the presence of you who are unknowable, and we thank you for Jesus who came to make you known. May we focus our minds and open our hearts to you in worship, that we may glimpse you, and catch a whiff of your presence. And may our glimpse or whiff be both a blessing and reminder that there is so much more of you that we have yet to discover.

Forgive us when in hubris we talk to you or about you as though we had you all worked out. Forgive us when we make you so much smaller than you are, and so understand ourselves as so much less than you do: you who call us your children.

As we worship you, hear us as we pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever. Amen.

Reading: Mark 8:22-33

Can you keep a secret? If you are told something and enjoined not to tell anyone, can you do it? Sometimes the most unimportant pieces of information which we would not normally remember can become full of urgency if we are told that they are secrets. It is when we may not tell that some of us most want to spill the beans!

In the incidents we have read just now, Jesus is urgent that people should not be told things. He took the blind man away from those who brought him: they were not allowed to see the cure. Just as he had done with the deaf and dumb man brought to him, Jesus did not perform a public healing but took the man aside. And when he was able to see clearly, Jesus sent him straight home, avoiding the village, where people were waiting to ogle and question – and rejoice, and draw conclusions. It was the conclusions that Jesus was most worried about.

Because Jesus had a problem: how both to be the Messiah and prevent people drawing the wrong conclusions. In some ways the healing of this blind man is a metaphor for what his problem was. He opened the man's eyes but at first he could not see clearly. He could see the basic shapes and outlines but not the details. The people looked like trees: it was easy for him to make mistakes about what he thought he saw; it might even be dangerous for him. And Jesus knew that it was only too easy for people who looked at him and what he was

doing and saying through the fixed lenses of their expectations to fail to see clearly, and so possibly to do a lot of damage.

The story moves on to a private moment on the road with his disciples. You know this story well, I am sure. Jesus asks what people are saying about him. He wants to know. He wants to know just what sort of conclusions people are drawing, how clearly they are seeing. And he gets the answers that reflect a degree of blurry vision: John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet of old. None of these answers are crazy. All of them showed that Jesus was seen to be a significant figure in the story of God's people. But none of them were right.

So Jesus asks his disciples what they think. He must have wondered what those who had seen most, who had heard most had concluded. How close was he to having anyone really understand what he was about? And Peter makes what is known as his great confession. "You are the Messiah."

This has got to be good news, because Peter is right. Other gospels show us Jesus affirming the rightness of Peter's answer, but Mark shows us how right he is by Jesus' reaction: "Don't tell anyone!"

Why not? If Jesus wants to know how successful he is being, and finds that at least some of his followers are cottoning on to what he is about, why shouldn't they share that understanding with those who are not seeing so clearly? And the answer is: because they are not seeing as clearly as they think they are. They have come up with the right word, but not the right understanding of that word. And so the great confession is at once followed by the great misunderstanding, showing just what the common reaction to Jesus' interpretation of Messiah will be.

When Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus begins to explain how he sees the Messianic role, and this is so far at odds with the popular understanding that Peter takes him aside and tells him he has got it wrong. Certainly, Jesus is not going to be the kind of Messiah which Peter had meant when he spoke the word. They can't both be right.

This is the episode which Mark has been building up to in his gospel until now. All of the feedings and healings and walking on water, and teaching has been designed to show people that Jesus is the Messiah and who the Messiah is.

Messiah wasn't a new concept, of course and it was a word which was charged with significance in the days in which Jesus lived.

Hymn: Jesus is the name we honour

If we want to understand who Jesus was and is and what he was about we cannot forget the context in which he lived. It is only as we understand that context that we can work out who Jesus is and how we can follow him in our own context.

Jesus lived in the days of the Roman empire. He lived in a land under occupation, and which, moreover, had been under occupation, except for brief interludes, for around six hundred years. He lived at the time of first Augustus and then Tiberius Caesar: a time when the Roman empire had moved from being a republic to having emperors, and, more significantly, those emperors, when they died, were declared to be divine, to be gods. So if anyone was to ask who the son of a god was, the answer was "Tiberius". Moreover in the state religion (not the Jewish religion) the emperor was the high priest.

Quite apart from the heavy hand of occupation: when you could be taken from what you were doing and told to carry a soldier's pack for him; when you could have your livelihood taken from you at a whim, when you could be sold into slavery, not near at hand but at the other end of the empire: quite apart from that, the very existence of the emperor

was an affront to the Jews. They were affronted that any man should call himself a son of a god. They were affronted that some pagan should style himself the High Priest when they had their own High Priest.

There was a Roman slogan which said that they brought *pax et securitas* – peace and security – but it did not feel that way for the non-Romans of the empire. As ever, history is written by the victors. And it is when a people feel oppressed and uncertain that they look back to the past to find hope for the future.

The people looked back and they found the writings of the prophets. The prophets held that God's Spirit had left his dwelling in the temple at the time of the exile and that though the exile was long over the reason that the occupation continued by successive regimes, was that God's Spirit had not yet returned. But he would. (You can find the main prophecies to say this in Ezekiel chapter 10 and in Malachi 3:1) Meanwhile there was a passage in Daniel which enabled people to count off the various regimes which had to come and go before that return.

Reading: Daniel 2:31-35

The thing about metaphors in prophecies is that they can be interpreted in more than one way. In the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the book of Daniel, we are told that the different parts of the statue refer to various empires to come – unnamed of course. However one way of counting off the empires can lead to the conclusion that the feet of iron and clay refers to the Roman empire and so it would be during that period that God would return to save his people, scattering all foreign powers like the blast of a huge rock. For an oppressed people that was enough: the time was come, the Godly king, in the line of David (another prophecy) would rise up. The Romans would be driven out.

The name that was given to that Godly king in the line of David, was the Messiah. The one anointed by God. People were on tiptoe of expectation that the Messiah would come soon.

And so you can see why Jesus wanted people to keep his secret: they would never understand what he was doing. It wasn't that his ministry was not political, it was that it was more than that: political was too small a concept to contain the idea of the kingdom of God. And it wasn't that he was not religious, but again religion was too small a concept to contain the idea of the kingdom of God. It wasn't that Jesus didn't think that he had come to bring God's power and rule to the world: he had and he did. It was that people had no idea what that was, and what it looked like. The people of his context were like Peter: setting their minds on human things, on human ends and not seeing the vast picture of humility and compassion and glory that is God.

There should be no complacency in us as we read these episodes in Mark's gospel. We should never, never think "Peter got it wrong, but *we* understand." We have no grounds for complacency: ever since the resurrection people have been trying to fit Jesus into the boxes of their preconceptions: religious boxes, political boxes, social boxes, denominational boxes. We have, sometimes in so many ways, tried to tell Jesus what his role is, what our Messiah is to do. And when he resists us, we sometimes think he has let us down.

Rather, as disciples of Jesus we should always be asking ourselves what our preconceptions are. We should always be asking God to show us new insights into Christ our Lord and God our Father. And we should remember that the Christ, the Messiah whom we follow is more than any human concept can tie him into. And in remembering that, surely we should be glad.

Hymn: Source and Sovereign, rock and cloud

Prayer:

As your church we come to prayer.

We pray to you as our Father, thanking you for your love and care, your provision and presence, and asking that you show your fatherly face to those who do not know what a father, or a good father is like. Father, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray to you as our Saviour, the meaning of the name that was given your Son, Jesus. We thank you for saving us and the world from the decay and guilt of sin. We thank you for saving us from living meaningless lives, from having no real reason to work our way through each day as it comes. And we pray for those who do not have your purpose at their hearts, who do not know that you have chosen and saved them, and that you want them to be your children for the world. Saviour, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray to you as our Lord, the king of all creation and the ruler of our lives. We thank you that we may look to you in your beauty and power, in your glorious humility and be raised above the mundane, even as the mundane around us is transformed by your presence. Rule our lives, with your easy and delightful yoke, steering us gently into your ways of compassion and love. And we pray for those who acknowledge no Lord but themselves, and who do not know what a littleness this is. May they find the delight of knowing that there is more than ourselves, and the joy and privilege of service to one who is more than we can imagine. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray to you as our shepherd. We thank you for all the ways that your shepherding hand has led and guided your people since the dawn of time, since the birth of the church, since the days of our childhood. We pray for your church: our local congregations, who cannot congregate; our friends in Libis and Kostalec; our wider Church of Scotland with its struggles to be faithful in discipleship; and your glorious church across the world, showing by its variety just some of the variety that is found in you. Be our shepherd and make us good sheep of your flock. Good shepherd, in your mercy, hear our prayer.
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hymn: Love divine, all loves excelling

Benediction:

As those who follow the Lord of all and who live within his kingdom
Go in peace to love and service the Lord.
And the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.

Postlude: "Voluntary" by Léon Boëllmann played by John Crombie